

Japan

International Religious Freedom Report 2002

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

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There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, there was some societal discrimination against followers of Aum Shinrikyo/Aleph.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 145,902 square miles, and its population is an estimated 127 million.

Regular participation in formal religious activities by the public is low, and an accurate determination of the proportions of adherents to specific religions is difficult. According to the latest statistics published by the Agency for Cultural Affairs in December 2000, approximately 50.1 percent of citizens adhered to Shintoism, 44.3 percent to Buddhism, 4.7 percent to so-called "new" religions, and 0.8 percent to Christianity. However, Shintoism and Buddhism are not mutually exclusive religions, and the figures do not represent the ratio of actual practitioners; most members claim to observe both. All other faiths are classified as "new religions" and include both local chapters of international religions such as the Unification Church of Japan and the Church of Scientology, as well as faiths founded in the country, such as Tenrikyo, Seichounoie, Sekai Kyusei Kyo, Perfect Liberty, and Risho Koseikai. A small segment of the population, predominantly foreign-born residents, attend Orthodox, Jewish, and Islamic services.

There are 28 Buddhist schools recognized by the Government under the 1951 Religious Corporation Law. The major Buddhist schools are Tendai, Shingon, Joudo, Zen, Nichiren, and Nara. In addition to traditional Buddhist orders, there are a number of Buddhist lay organizations, including the Soka Gakkai, which has

more than 8 million members. The three main schools of Shintoism are Jinja, Kyoha, and Shinkyoha. Among Christians both Catholic and Protestant denominations enjoy modest followings.

According to an April 2001 Justice Ministry report, Aum Shinrikyo/Aleph has an estimated 1,650 followers, a decrease from 10,000 in 1995. However, in May 2002, Aum Shinrikyo/Aleph claimed to have only 1,187 members.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, there were some restrictions.

In response to Aum Shinrikyo terrorist attacks in 1995, a 1996 amendment to the Religious Corporation Law gives the authorities increased oversight of religious groups and requires greater disclosure of financial assets by religious corporations. The Diet enacted two additional laws in 1999 aimed at regulating the activities of Aum Shinrikyo/Aleph.

Some Buddhist and Shinto temples and shrines receive public support as national historic or cultural sites. In 1997 the Supreme Court ruled that a prefectural government may not contribute public funds to only one religious organization if the donations will support, encourage, and promote a specific religious group; however, no cases questioning the use of public funds in connection with a religious organization have been brought since 1998.

The Government does not require that religious groups be registered or licensed; however, in order to receive official recognition as a religious organization, which brings tax benefits and other advantages, a group must register with local or national authorities as a "religious corporation." In practice almost all religious groups register. The Cultural Affairs Agency listed 182,659 registered religious groups as of December 2000. However, in recent years, the Cultural Affairs Agency has estimated that as many as 5,000 of these groups are dormant, and the agency has taken legal action in an attempt to remove dormant groups from its registry. Since 1998 courts have accepted requests by the Cultural Affairs Agency to dissolve at least four dormant religious bodies that were registered under the Religious Corporation Law.

There are no known restrictions on proselytizing.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Aum Shinrikyo organization, which officially was renamed Aleph by its leadership in February 2000, is under active government surveillance. Aum Shinrikyo lost its legal status as a religious organization in 1996 following the indictment of several hundred members for the group's 1995 sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway system and other crimes. The Tokyo District and High Courts sentenced eight senior members to death and six others to life imprisonment in connection with the 1995 sarin gas attack, as well as the killings of Aum Shinrikyo members who attempted to leave the organization. Another 180 members were sentenced up to 10 years' imprisonment. In August 2001, the Tokyo High Court upheld a lower court ruling that sentenced a member to 17 years imprisonment for his role in a 1994 sarin gas attack in Matsumoto that killed 7 persons. As of the end of the period covered by this report, cases still were pending in district courts against four other senior Aum members, including its leader Shoko Asahara. The Tokyo District Court continues to order Aum Shinrikyo/Aleph to pay several million dollars in compensation to survivors and next-of-kin in connection with these cases. In August 2001, the Tokyo District Court ordered seven former Aum members to pay \$475,806 (59 million yen) in compensation to relatives of a man who had been abducted and killed by Aum members in 1995.

In 1999 the Diet enacted two laws allowing the authorities to monitor and inspect without warrant facilities of groups found to have committed "indiscriminate mass murder during the past 10 years" and to uncover assets of companies associated with these groups. The 1999 laws also permit the authorities to place restrictions on the use of properties owned by these groups if they are found to engage in aggressive recruiting. The new laws are subject to review in 2005. On the basis of this legislation, the Public Security Examination Commission placed Aum Shinrikyo/Aleph under continuous surveillance in January 2000 for a 3-year period. The Public Security Investigative Agency conducted at least 12 on-site inspections of 27 Aum Shinrikyo/Aleph facilities around the country in connection with the surveillance order during the period covered by this report. In June 2001, the Tokyo District Court rejected an Aum Shinrikyo/Aleph lawsuit that argued the surveillance is a violation of the constitutional right to religious freedom.

Under the 1999 laws, Aum Shinrikyo/Aleph also is required to file a report every 3 months, listing member names and addresses. In 2000 the Supreme Court upheld the decision of Ibaraki prefecture to block the school registration of three children of Aum Shinrikyo founder Shoko Asahara; there were no further developments in this case during the period covered by this report.

Security officials investigated the activities of mosques periodically during the fall of 2001.

Members of the Unification Church and Jehovah's Witnesses continued to allege that police do not act in response to allegations of forced deprogramming of church members. They also claimed that police do not enforce the laws against kidnapping when the victim is held by family members and that Unification Church members are subjected to prolonged detention by individuals, who are not charged by police.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, there was some societal discrimination against followers of Aum Shinrikyo/Aleph.

In March 2002, Kyushu University officials refused to admit a former Aum member who had passed the University 癩 medical faculty entrance examination on the basis of his past Aum membership. At least eight municipalities in which Aum Shinrikyo/Aleph facilities are active refused to register Aum Shinrikyo/Aleph group members as residents due to opposition by local residents. Aum Shinrikyo/Aleph filed 8 lawsuits on behalf of 71 members to challenge the refusal to register their members as residents. During the period covered by this report, district courts in Osaka, Nagoya, and Tokyo ordered several municipalities to rescind their decisions to refuse to register Aum Shinrikyo/Aleph members, and also ordered that they pay damages to the applicants. In April and May 2002, the Nagoya High Court and the Tokyo High Court upheld the district court rulings. However, some local authorities continued to appeal the district decisions to higher courts at the end of the period covered by this report.

In November 2001, a woman was convicted for a May 2001 incident in which she threw a defaced copy of the Koran at a place of business owned by a Muslim foreign resident. The Toyama District Court sentenced the woman to a 1-year suspended sentence of penal servitude for the theft of four copies of religious text from a Muslim place of worship. The defendant claimed that she had committed the act to embarrass her family publicly.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights, including the promotion of religious freedom internationally. The U.S. Embassy maintains periodic contact with representatives of religious organizations.

Released on October 7, 2002

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